

REVIEW OF LEO STRAUSS' *DIE RELIGIONSKRITIK SPINOZAS*  
ALS GRUNDLAGE SEINER BIBELWISSENSCHAFT

GERHARD KRÜGER

The following is a translation of a review by Gerhard Krüger of Leo Strauss' first book, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1930).<sup>1</sup> The review, a noteworthy example of the art, discusses the themes of this work in a manner both lucid and sympathetic yet not without a certain critical distance. The importance to Strauss of this review was emphasized in the preface written in 1965 for the publication, in the German language original, of his book on Hobbes (first published in English translation in 1936). Strauss described Krüger's review as one which "expressed my intention and result more clearly than I myself had done."<sup>2</sup> In the same context, he called attention to the importance of his early ties with Krüger, ties based on "philosophic interest in theology." In addition, Krüger's work contained an opening to classical thought, the principle of which was stated in the concluding sentence of his book on Kant and with which Strauss at that time was fully in agreement, as he said explicitly.<sup>3</sup> These affinities suggest the interest this review will hold for students of both Krüger and Strauss.

Strauss' late comments on Krüger occur in the same context in which we find the following statement: "the theological-political problem has remained the theme of my investigations" since that time. (Emphasis in the original.) This unusually frank remark follows an observation on the "re-awakening of theology" which "appeared to make it necessary to investigate how far the critique of orthodox theology – both Jewish and Christian – deserved to be victorious."<sup>4</sup> The Spinoza book – dedicated to Franz Rosenzweig, whose thought is cited as part of what signified the re-awakening of theology – is one which he later described as written by "a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of the theological-political problem."<sup>5</sup> It is a book which obviously addresses a fundamental part of that problem as it presents itself in modern thought. But the work of Karl Barth is also part of the theological re-awakening, he observed. It may be surmised that Strauss did not think the theological-political problem exclusively Jewish nor exclusively German; it may have become once again a problem for other faiths and countries and for all who once confidently expected that religion would wither away (becomes weaker) in the modern and secular state. It remained, in any case, central in Strauss' work.<sup>6</sup>

In the translation of this review, I have reproduced Krüger's use of emphasis. When he refers to a specific page of the original edition of Spinoza's *Critique of Religion*, I have given that reference and then added, after a semi-colon, the number of the corresponding page or pages of the English translation. That translation, by E. M. Sinclair, was published in 1965 by Schocken Books.

In this learned, specialized historical investigation, there is concealed a fundamental philosophic discussion of the problem of the Enlightenment. This study is as instructive for the philosopher and the theologian as for the expert on Spinoza and the historian of general intellectual history [Geistesgeschichte].

If, for the philosopher, there must be nothing which is "self-evident", then that is valid also for the Enlightenment, which forms the intellectual foundation of modern culture. As its name [Aufklärung] indicates, it understood itself essentially as the "exit of man from his self-caused immaturity" (Kant), that is, as critique of revealed religion. In tracing out this long-forgotten argument, Strauss brings to light how very problematic even the argumentative "refutation" of revealed religion remained, how much the faith in science contributed to helping science to victory. Strauss proceeds with a remarkable impartiality from the teachings of the critics back to their

\* Translated from the German, with an introduction and notes, by Donald J. Maletz.

<sup>1</sup> Krüger's review of Leo Strauss, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1930), appeared in the *Deutsche Literaturzeitung*, 1931, Heft 51 (December 20), pp. 2407-2412.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Strauss, "Preface" to *Hobbes Politische Wissenschaft*, trans. Donald J. Maletz, *Interpretation*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (January, 1979), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2 and p. 3, note 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> See his "Preface to the English Translation", in: *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> For explicit further discussion of this problem, I would call attention to Strauss' *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1964), especially p. 241, and to the study of this book by Seth Benardete: "Leo Strauss' *The City and Man*," *The Political Science Reviewer*, Vol. VIII (Fall, 1978), p. 1 ff. Also: Leo Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," newly published in English in *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. III (1979); and, further, "Jerusalem and Athens. Some Preliminary Reflections," *The City College Papers*, No. 6 (New York: The Library, The City College, City University of New York, 1967).

contestable *motives*, which define the specific and historical structure of their claim to truth. By bringing these motives into the open, motives which still are influential today, he is able to recall the historical vitality of this struggle.

It has been known since Dilthey that, in the formation of the "natural system" in the seventeenth century, the tie to the *Stoa* played an important role. Strauss elaborates on this picture, in portraying the critique of religion in the seventeenth century as a "stage in the overall history of the critique of religion in general" (p. 2; 35); from Democritus through Epicurus, Hobbes, Spinoza and Hume to Feuerbach and Marx there extends one tradition whose classical representative is *Epicurus* (p. 11f; 45f). "The Epicurean critique of religion is one source, and indeed the most important one, for the seventeenth century critique of religion" (p. 4; 38); the influence of Epicurus "is at least equal to the influence of the *Stoa*," although it rests much less on a comprehensive "rebirth" of the teaching than on a re-awakening of the old motive (p. 17; 49). While according to the dominant view it is above all the new sovereignty of man enlightening himself which emerges, Strauss' theme enables him to demonstrate how much this man finds himself originally *on the defensive*: tormented by religion's threats of the beyond and driven back and forth by the anarchy of the sects, he demands above all a truth which brings *reassurance, softening, and consolation*. "Interest in the security and in the softening of life may be called the characteristic interest of the Enlightenment in general" (p. 199; 209). This "Epicurean" motive is in itself compatible with different possibilities for satisfaction — Moses Mendelssohn called immortality comforting, while for the Marrano da Costa it threatened terrors (p. 28f; 58-9); but in the long run it is however the *mechanical world-view* which most thoroughly satisfies the interest in truth as the "consoling truth" (p. 29; 60). As already in the case of Epicurus and Lucretius (p. 10f; 43f), the issue concerns "the opposition between the scientific view of the world, guided by the principle of continuity and therefore comforting, and the mythic-religious view, which refers back to the arbitrary working of divine powers and is therefore discomforting" (p. 85; 108). An "original inclination of the human heart" (p. 19; 51) ensures that on the one hand regularities are sought out — and, where they are not to be found in the "visible order" with Aristotle, they are *constructed* in an "invisible order" with atomism — while on the other hand a theologian like Calvin discovers the working of an unfathomable will "in every manifest disparity, irregularity, discontinuity" (p. 187; 198). Thus *one* unprovable orientation in experience of the world stands here against the other; the opponents talk past each other to this degree. But, since it is nevertheless the same world which they experience, there is then also a common ground which becomes the battlefield in the specific dispute concerning the revealed aspect of religion: it is *miracles* and the text of the *Bible*. Since Strauss can show that biblical criticism inherently presupposes the critique of religion — "distance" in regard to the Bible (see in particular p. 247ff; 251ff) — the issue is concentrated on miracles. Here it is a question of the direct, unambiguous manifestation of a divine creative power for the "mere experience" of everyone (p. 103ff; 126ff). It is shown — not without a polemic against the "softening" in the whole of modern theology of the original concept of miracles, which applied to physical nature (p. 111, note 166, pp. 177, 204; 131, 190, 212) — that the "metaphysical critique" of miracles in Spinoza (and also elsewhere), the proof of their impossibility in principle, is not very convincing, because in the decisive respect, in the dispute about the *sufficiency of reason*, it does not at all understand the opponent's position (p. 194ff; 204ff), (and) because it is itself subject to objection on the grounds of the anarchy of metaphysical systems (p. 121; 140). Much more effective and historically decisive was the "positive critique," which was silent about the "possibility" of miracles but contested in the concrete case the *knowability* of the miracle *as such*, while at the same time it undertook to explain the *faith* in miracles. "Human weakness," which viewed itself as incapable of explaining, is here taken not as grounds for faith but for skeptical suspension of judgment (p. 113; 133). And since miracles belong above all to the past, it is easy to explain the *reports* of them on the basis of the "prejudices of a people of ancient times" (p. 114ff; 134ff). Presupposed in this explanation is the "living experience of progress in the knowledge of nature" (p. 115; 134), which can take everything "unexplainable" as something merely not yet explained and which is *historically conscious* at the same time of its fundamental superiority over the "ancient" in the sense of the barbaric (p. 117; 135). "Positive critique is legitimate only as *defensive critique*" (p. 127; 145). That is, it is "not strictly self-evident." Religion accuses the skeptic of obstinacy and of flight from a radical reflection on his sufficiency; critique cannot refute the claim to authority in principle, its skepticism can only *render laughable* certain banal consequences of this claim. "Reason must become 'spirit' [Geist] in order to be able actively to experience its more than royal freedom, its sovereignty which is incapable of being shaken by anything" (p. 127; 146). It must "laugh" the opponent out of his position (Lessing) (p. 125; 143).

It belongs to the most valuable insights of Strauss, both historically and in principle, that, in his analysis of the Enlightenment, he makes the ambiguous concept of freedom precise as the concept of *freedom from prejudice* (p. 163ff; 178ff). "Prejudice" is a historical category. Exactly for this reason, the struggle of the Enlightenment against prejudice is different from the struggle against appearance and opinion with which philosophy began its world-historical journey" (p. 167; 181). "The justification for — and at the same time the questionableness of — the category of 'prejudice' first becomes visible, and only then, when revealed religion is taken into considera-



tion along with it" (p. 164; 179). The fundamental Epicurean orientation receives in modernity a decisive modification through the pre-existing fact of a "dogmatic" religion which intervenes with its *thought* in the *order of law* [Recht] and *state*. The struggle is no longer against the madness which is "fearful" only to the individual but also against the madness which is "dangerous" to the social peace, which is used by priests and kings in order to withhold earthly goods from the people (pp. 18f., 30, 200f, note 276, 215; 50f, 61, 209f, 224). Although for this last formulation there are already familiar predecessors among the sophists, Strauss rightly finds here something new: the dogma of revealed religion contains quite a different restriction of *thought* within the community than did ancient myth. The Epicurean tradition is now supplemented by the legendary "averoistic" one, which shows the wise man in his *theoria* to be protected from the many by the "invention" of religion, and by the praise of "virtù", which already, in Machiavelli and Bruno, asserts the arguments of Nietzsche (p. 13ff; 48ff). The general discussion about the difference between modern and ancient thought receives here for once an "existential" sharpness: Strauss shows *in concreto* how much the modern "disposition of method, of culture" (p. 44; 71) is a *historical antithesis*, that is, an unprovable negative life-decision opposed to that past which believed in revelation.

The historical analyses within which this fundamental problematic comes to light lead from Epicurus first to some precursors of Spinoza's critique of religion: da Costa, La Peyrère, and Hobbes. The proof of a dependence of da Costa on Servetius and of La Peyrère on the Socinians is new. The exposition of Hobbes (cf. p. 222ff; 229ff) allows one to see that, in relation to Spinoza's still classical concept of happiness, he is the more modern and more radical. In Spinoza's *Theological-political Treatise* itself, Strauss uncovers a three-fold argument: 1. with the *orthodoxy* (Jewish and Christian) which is plainly skeptical in regard to reason; 2. with that scholasticism of *Maimonides* which recognizes reason; and 3. with *Calvin*, in whom the faith basis of *orthodoxy* first becomes quite radically visible. (In regard to this last point, Strauss has, in my opinion, overstated his overall presentation of the basis in faith: as certain as it is that Calvin measures every teaching about God solely by "pietas," it is however clear in the first part of his *Institutio* that the *problem* of knowledge of God is common to all men as a "natural" problem. But in the context of his comparison, Strauss hits indeed upon the essential thing.) Critique (of "scripture") on the basis of reason is carefully separated from a preliminary stage, "critique on the basis of scripture": by exhibition of inconsistencies in the literal meaning of the text, the *waverer* is first of all to be freed for philosophy, and the essential content of the Bible is to be restricted to the moral demands of "piety" common to all of the scriptures. The demonstration that Spinoza could believe that he surpassed Calvin's teaching on predestination with his teaching of the amor Dei is interesting (p. 190ff; 201ff). It is surely characteristic of the modern thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that it did not simply drop the theological problematic of the past but, by moving it to new ground, first introduced its atrophy — often contrary to its own expectations. The interpretation of the critical thought of Spinoza is completed by investigation of his *analysis* of religion and its "social function" in the state. The observations of Spinoza on biblical criticism form the conclusion.

Strauss has understood throughout how to discover concrete historical situations behind subtle inconsistencies of theory: the hope of La Peyrère for a political restoration of Judaism (p. 55ff; 79ff), Spinoza's "prudent" distance from Judaism in contrast to the rootedness of the ideas of Maimonides in membership in the Jewish community (p. 146ff; 157ff), Spinoza's "theoretical" hatred for ideological judgment in politics as distinguished from the really political coolness of Machiavelli (p. 218ff; 227ff), and finally the connection between Spinoza's doctrine of the state and the Netherlands' successful struggle for freedom (p. 236ff; 241ff). The presentation rests throughout on exhaustive knowledge of the sources. An appendix gives materials for analysis of the sources of da Costa and Spinoza; it reveals a comprehensive erudition.

The content of this inquiry is of unusual interest. But it is regrettable that the author is at first tiring because of the *form* of his book. His very refined and complicated interpretations conceal the fundamental problem in many scattered places instead of expounding it coherently in its full compass. The work needs a more transparent arrangement of the whole and a more perceptible organization in individual parts. The analysis of religion by Hobbes and Spinoza along with the accompanying teachings about the state would certainly be better attached to the first paragraphs of the introduction, together with the account of the essence of the Enlightenment. The specific divisions provided by the table of contents would very much facilitate the reading if they were still more detailed and indicated in the text by more than dashes. The *style* of the author often suffers from an all too great prudence, while at other places it can again become striking and lively.